

Parents' Beliefs on Eikaiwa and Elementary English

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1. Introduction

Japan effectively has two systems of English language education: The official system, which includes elementary schools, junior and senior high schools, and universities; and the *eikaiwa* industry, which comprises multitudes of private language schools nationwide. *Eikaiwa* can be translated as “English conversation”, but in practice connotes extracurricular privately-owned language schools espousing methods and practices which differ from those of mandatory education. The *eikaiwa* industry is independent from but supplements mandatory English education.

English education in Japan for young learners (YLS), defined by Lewis and Mol (2009) as learners between six and thirteen years old, is almost entirely in the hands of *eikaiwa*, with complete market control only ending when weekly *foreign language activities* (FLA) hours begin in the fifth grade of elementary school. Japan's learning situation for most YLS resembles that of Greece, where as Enever and Moon (2010) state, private language schools “have *become* the system” (p.5, emphasis in original). However, the government is currently considering moving the start of this programme to earlier grades (The Japan Times 2013), meaning that *eikaiwa* face a new competitor in a marketplace they have heretofore monopolised. The purpose of this paper is to describe how parents' beliefs about language education affect their support for the above-described expansion of FLA and whether they see FLA as a viable replacement for *eikaiwa*. To that end, a survey was conducted among parents whose children started attending *eikaiwa* before junior high school, i.e. before the age of about twelve. Parents' beliefs in the values of *eikaiwa* and FLA will be analysed for ideological and other factors.

The next section will examine current writing on English education in Japan.

2. Current Writing on Eikaiwa, FLA and English in Japan

In the voluminous writing on ELT in Japan that has been done in the last few decades, some consistent themes have emerged. First, English in Japan has symbolic meaning beyond its usefulness as a language, and is often juxtaposed with Japanese as the language of *the rest of the world*, serving as both a gateway to international society and as a reminder of what is supposedly unique about Japan and the Japanese language. Seargeant (2009) gives the most complete account of this particular ontology of English, and Schneer (2007) illustrates a specific instance of how this symbolic role that English plays affects pedagogy, conscripting English into nationalist efforts.

Second, English in mandatory education suffers from a large gap between current ELT norms and practice within classrooms. Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) periodically issues policy directives which seem to have an ear to current ELT norms, but the effects of these policies are rarely if ever felt by individual students, who continue to receive grammar-translation classes. Nishino and Watanabe (2008) describe how repeated government prescriptions for *communicativeness* have been ignored at the classroom level, and Tahira (2011) calls into question MEXT's motives in issuing policies it continuously fails to implement. Dissatisfaction with mandatory English education is common as Japan regularly places near the bottom of Asian countries in English test scores, in contrast with its high rankings in other subjects (McVeigh 2002).

Third, Japan's culture of education contains a large private component through which individuals purchase either advantages within mainstream education or unrelated content outside it. This includes omnipresent *juku* or cram schools, which students attend

after regular school for help in passing entrance examinations (Rohlen 1980; Fukuzawa 1998; Russel 1998), as well as miscellaneous other classes including music, calligraphy, and *eikaiwa*, which have little or no part in mandatory education (Peak 1998). Kubota (2011a; 2011b; 2011c) and Kubota and McKay (2009) have done the most extensive work on the learning milieu that *eikaiwa* constitutes for the adult population. No work that this author could find has given extensive treatment to *eikaiwa* for children.

The next section will describe some of the characteristics of *eikaiwa* and English as it is taught in mandatory education.

3. Young Learner's Contexts for Learning English in Japan

a. Eikaiwa

The niche left by mandatory schooling in foreign language education for YLs is filled by the enormous *eikaiwa* industry. At its peak in 2003, the industry earned an estimated 375 billion yen annually (Clarke 2007). The town this writer lives in, with a population of 135,578 (Fujinomiya City Office n.d.), contains no fewer than seven *eikaiwa*, including four national chains.

Because *eikaiwa* are not a part of the regular school system and are not bound by directives from MEXT or other policy organs, their practices vary widely. Nonetheless, on the promotional websites of the largest *eikaiwa* chains, the following commonalities can be observed:

- Explicit appeals to the benefits of having NSTs, called *gaikokujin koushi/kyoushi* or "foreigner instructors/teachers", depicted universally as caucasian as noted in previous research (Seargeant 2009; Breckenridge and Erling 2011)

- Extensive reference to “communication” and little or no reference to grammar
- Emphasis placed on original teaching methods and materials
- A dichotomous depiction of NSTs and Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) (no school whose materials were surveyed failed to point out the nationalities of its teachers), with sharply differing descriptions of the qualities and duties of JTEs and NSTs
- Short and infrequent classes of less than an hour per week, with the shortest classes for the youngest ages
- Class sizes of 5 to 8 students

(Aeon Corporation n.d.; Amity Corporation n.d. a; b; ECC Corporation n.d.; Shane Corporation n.d.; Seiha Network Co., Ltd. 2012a; b; c; Nova Co., Ltd. 2013; Yamaha Corporation 2013a; b)

The websites also make unambiguous reference to children’s CP for language learning as a reason for earlier enrolment. Of the schools cited above, three offer classes to children before even the age of one. The highest minimum age at any of them is three years old, far below the thresholds of six or twelve years old proposed by Long (1990) or of fifteen by Patkowski (1980).

Signing up for and paying tuition at *eikaiwa* is ultimately a business transaction, making parents, as the paying customers, the gatekeepers of their children’s English education. A potential alternative to this is the FLA programme recently begun in elementary schools, which is the topic of the next section.

b. Foreign Language Activities

The FLA programme in elementary schools differs from English education in Japanese junior high and high schools in a number of ways. A transition between relatively egalitarian and student-centred elementary school and strictly ability-sorted and test-oriented junior and senior high schools is a widely recognised trait of Japanese mandatory education (Fukuzawa 1998; Keaten et al. 1997; Slater 2010), and is apparent in its treatment of English as well. Elementary school FLA classes are relatively infrequent at once a week and do not feature testing (Fennelly and Luxton 2011; Fukada 2011; The Japan Times 2013). The FLA programme since its inception in 2011 (MEXT 2012) has come under criticism for its utilisation of undertrained teachers, whether NSTs without prior teaching experience or simply the children’s non-English-speaking homeroom teacher (Fennelly and Luxton 2011; Fukada 2011; The Japan Times 2013). FLA classes, similar to English classes at other levels of schooling (Nishino and Watanabe 2008), show signs of strain between policy and implementation.

The proposed curriculum for FLA follows well-known principles for teaching YLs. According to MEXT’s Course of Study documents (MEXT 2009), FLA classes seek to help students “experience the joy of communication in the foreign language” (p. 1) and “actively listen to and speak in the foreign language” (p. 1). The same document states that teachers are to “try to have pupils understand language and culture experientially” (p. 2) rather than through lectures, provide content “in line with pupils’ interest” (p. 2), “make active use of audio-visual materials” (p. 2), and “adopt gestures etc.” (p. 3) as a means of non-verbal communication. These guidelines align the class style with those recommended by Cameron (2001), Lewis and Mol (2009) and with some modifications compatible with the materials-light approach proposed by Meddings and Thornbury (2009).

At least some evidence suggests that elementary school teachers have been following MEXT's communicative guidelines for FLA. A survey conducted by educational materials producer Benesse reveals that teachers did in fact make extensive use of oral and aural activities during FLA hours, including chants, role-plays, listening exercises, and games (Benesse Educational Research and Development Centre 2011). Sample lessons made available by MEXT (MEXT n.d. a; b) seem to indicate that students' interests and proficiency levels were integrated into lessons and the activities were highly student-centred. Evidence of the success of FLA exists, but is far from overwhelming or conclusive, given the misgivings about the programme cited earlier.

As part of a global trend (Cameron 2003; Enever and Moon 2010), the Japanese government is considering moving the starting age for FLA down to the third grade, or about nine years old, and making English an assessed subject from the fifth grade (The Japan Times 2013; Yoshida 2013). This plan brings it into further competition with private *eikaiwa*, and may have effects on the educational choices of many parents. The study conducted for this paper to assess the nature of these effects will be discussed in the following section.

4. Survey Methods and Results

A single-sheet survey was distributed to parents of children attending the *eikaiwa* owned by this author. Listed were nine five-point Likert-style questions, written in Japanese by this author and proofread by a Japanese native-speaking co-owner, followed by a space for biographical information. Surveys were kept anonymous because many of the parents know the author personally. Atop each survey was a brief explanation of the author's participation in an MA programme and statement of the intent to use the survey in

said programme. Of the survey forms distributed, 34 were returned ($n=34$), and all surveys that were returned were completed fully. Results can be seen in Figure 1, with correlations between items in Figure 2. The survey itself can be found in appendix A.

	mean	median	std dev
1. I decided to send my child to eikaiwa so he/she would be taught by a native speaker.	4.65	5	0.54
2. I decided to send my child to eikaiwa to take advantage of the period when children are proficient at language learning.	4.24	4	0.85
3. I decided to send my child to eikaiwa to help them on junior high school and high school tests.	3.12	3	0.84
4. I decided to send my child to eikaiwa because eikaiwa have different teaching methods from school English classes.	4.03	4	1.03
5. I decided to send my child to eikaiwa because he/she will not have time for activities besides studying for exams once he/she begins junior high school.	2.88	3	0.91
6. I decided to send my child to eikaiwa because the classes are more high-level.	3.47	4	1.02
7. I decided to send my child to eikaiwa so that he/she can have the chance to contact foreign culture(s).	4.21	4	0.73
8. I think English activities in elementary school should start at an earlier grade than the present starting grade.	4.00	4	1.04
9. If English activities in elementary schools begin earlier, elementary schoolers will not need to attend eikaiwa anymore.	2.44	3	0.82
Age that child started attending eikaiwa	7.19	7	2.59
Sex of child (f=0, m=1)	0.60		

Figure 1: average scores and standard deviations

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1 NST	1.00	0.25	0.03	0.18	0.04	0.14	0.34	0.27	-0.25
2 CP	0.25	1.00	0.38	0.20	0.31	0.08	0.11	0.48	0.11
3 help on tests	0.03	0.38	1.00	0.41	0.37	0.43	0.21	0.17	0.18
4 different methods	0.18	0.20	0.41	1.00	0.39	0.39	-0.09	0.28	0.09
5 too busy in JHS	0.04	0.31	0.37	0.39	1.00	0.45	0.22	0.22	0.27
6 high-level	0.14	0.08	0.43	0.39	0.45	1.00	0.31	0.03	-0.00
7 foreign culture	0.34	0.11	0.21	-0.09	0.22	0.31	1.00	-0.20	-0.21
8 earlier FLA	0.27	0.48	0.17	0.28	0.22	0.03	-0.20	1.00	0.21
9 FLA replaces <i>eikaiwa</i>	-0.25	0.11	0.18	0.09	0.27	-0.00	-0.21	0.21	1.00

Figure 2: correlations between items 1-9 (those higher than 0.40 are boldfaced)

As shown in Figure 1, parents agreed the most strongly that they wanted their children to be taught by NSTs (item 1). This item had both the highest mean score (4.65) and the lowest standard deviation (0.54), indicating strong and unanimous agreement. Item 2 has the second-highest average score (4.24), indicating that many parents send their children to *eikaiwa* to take advantage of their assumed CP. Parents did not strongly embrace or reject the notion that they sent their children to *eikaiwa* because they have more time for extracurricular activities before the start of junior high school (item 5, 2.88), which is a non-biological age-related effect, leaving belief in a biological, developmental or physiological CP as a likely cause for item 2's high score. The repeated reference to a biological CP in the advertisements of the *eikaiwa* chains cited above make it clear that belief in it is common among *eikaiwa* customers.

Survey responses seem to indicate much stronger *integrative* than *instrumental* motivation for enrolling children in *eikaiwa*, following Gardner and Lambert's (1959) rubric. Wanting children to have contact with a foreign culture (item 7) had very high average support among those surveyed (4.21). Three items measuring belief in the pedagogical

value of *eikaiwa* (items 3, 4, and 6) were correlated with each other but only item 4's "different methods" had a particularly high mean score (4.03, versus 3.12 and 3.47 for items 3 and 6), which would seem to indicate a lack of *instrumental* motivation. The measures employed for this survey seem inadequate in retrospect, which will be discussed below.

In answer to the central question of this paper, parents seem to want elementary school FLA to begin earlier (item 8, 4.00), but are divided on whether FLA is an adequate substitute for *eikaiwa* (item 9, 2.44). Support for an earlier start for FLA is correlated the most strongly with belief in CP (item 2, correl=0.48), and most negatively correlated with wanting their children to experience foreign culture via English lessons (item 7, correl=-0.20). Agreement that an earlier start for FLA means that children will not need *eikaiwa* anymore is correlated with belief that children will not have time for activities besides studying upon reaching JHS (item 5, correl=0.27), as well as support for the earlier start itself (item 8, correl=0.21), and negatively correlated with wanting their children to be taught by native speakers (item 1, correl=-0.25) and wanting their child to contact foreign culture through English classes (item 7, correl=-0.21).

The findings mirror the advertising tactics employed by the major *eikaiwa* chains on their websites. Parents are interested primarily in having their children taught by NSTs, "striking while the iron is hot" in terms of children's supposed biological CP, and having their children make contact with foreign cultures. These factors may explain the findings that the parents generally support expanding FLA to lower grades but are not sure if it can replace *eikaiwa*. Implications of these results will be discussed in the next section.

5. Discussion

Ideological factors explain much of the ambivalence about FLA. In fact, beliefs about the pedagogical quality of *eikaiwa* (items 4 and 6, 4.03 and 3.47 respectively), had almost no correlation with seeing FLA as a replacement for it (0.09 and 0.00 respectively), meaning that parents look to something other than quality when making choices about foreign language education for their children. Belief in CP, an ideological factor, is an obvious predictor of support for FLA, since FLA's most certain effect is English education for younger children. Evidence for CP in some learning situations exists (Patkowski 1980; Lightbown and Spada 2006), but none for students learning in *eikaiwa*- or FLA-like situations.

Another ideological factor which may explain the lack of support for FLA is *native-speakerism*. In FLA classes the presence of NSTs is not guaranteed, and parents who prioritise the presence of NSTs in *eikaiwa* are naturally less likely to see FLA as a viable replacement. NSTs seem to be evaluated by parents as if categorically different from JTEs, which is a phenomenon with many precedents in Japanese society. The JET Programme, which has supplied NSTs to the state school system since 1987, recruits college graduates from Kachru's (1992) *inner circle* countries with no required teaching experience (Breckenridge and Erling 2011). Research has also found that students rate NSTs and JTEs using different criteria, reflecting different expectations of the roles NSTs and JTEs are supposed to play (Tanabe and Mori 2013). This tendency extends to the university level, often resulting in discriminatory hiring practices (Hall 1998; McVeigh 2002). As Holliday (2005) writes, there is "an established belief that 'native speaker' teachers represent a 'Western culture' from which springs the ideals both of the English language and of English language teaching methodology" (cited in Seargeant 2009). The

results of the survey conducted for this paper highlight the extent to which belief in the exceptional benefits of having NSTs support *eikaiwa* at the expense of FLA.

As mentioned earlier, the single items (3 and 7) representing *instrumental* and *integrative* motivation (Gardner and Lambert 1959) in this study are inadequate and call for further study. The ideological role that English plays in Japanese society means that what first appears to be *integrative* motivation (e.g. becoming a member of the target culture) may actually be *instrumental* (e.g. being rewarded for one's international image by members of one's own community). Also of great importance is the fact that the survey is not one of motivations for learning English personally, but wanting English taught to children. As Kubota and McKay (2009) found when investigating English learners in the Japanese countryside, adults may want children to learn English for ideological reasons not shared by the children themselves. Seen in this light, item 7's "having contact with foreign culture", takes on possible nationalist undertones. One may view contact with foreign cultures as a buttress to one's national identity or as a sort of national project for the improvement of Japan (McVeigh 2002; Butler and Iino 2005; Seargeant 2009). Because of the complicated role that English plays in Japanese society, the high score for item 7 (4.21) and lower score for item 3 (3.12) should not be taken as strong evidence that parents want their children to integrate into a foreign culture, nor that the material benefits of English study are unimportant to them. Further study is necessary to better understand the interplay between supposedly *integrative* and *instrumental* motivations for parents who enrol their children in foreign language classes.

6. Conclusions

The *eikaiwa* industry seems to take advantage of the popularity of notions that are controversial if not widely denounced in ELT literature: that NSTs are the clear ideal, that age is the most important variable for success in learning a L2, that English is the property of caucasians. There remain major problems with English education in Japanese mandatory schooling, but the way forward may lie in reforming English education for those already receiving it rather than responding to consumer demand and starting English classes at younger ages. Regardless of the quality of mandatory English education, as long as the various ideologies that surround English in Japan remain intact, it seems that *eikaiwa* will continue to play a role, although one of unknown effectiveness, in Japan's educational culture.

(3,263 words)

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Appendix A: Survey

私は現在、応用言語学の修士号取得のためイギリス・レスター大学大学院で学んでおり、今期は子どもに小学生のうちから英会話を習わせている／習わせた事のある保護者に関する研究を行っています。研究論文に役立てたく思いますので、以下の質問への返答ご協力をお願いします（無記名で）。

Mark Makino

1. ネイティブスピーカーから教わるために子どもを英会話教室に通わせることに決めた。

全く同意できない 同意できない どちらともいえない 同意できる 非常に同意できる

2. 言語の習得に有利な時期を活かすために子どもを英会話教室に通わせることに決めた。

全く同意できない 同意できない どちらともいえない 同意できる 非常に同意できる

3. 中学／高校受験に役立つため、子どもを英会話教室に通わせることに決めた。

全く同意できない 同意できない どちらともいえない 同意できる 非常に同意できる

4. 英会話教室での教え方は学校英語の教え方と違うので、子どもを英会話教室に通わせることに決めた。

全く同意できない 同意できない どちらともいえない 同意できる 非常に同意できる

5. 中学生になると受験勉強以外の活動をする時間がなくなるため、子どもを小学生のうちに英会話教室に通わせることに決めた。

全く同意できない 同意できない どちらともいえない 同意できる 非常に同意できる

6. 英会話教室は学校英語と比べてレベルが高いため、子どもを英会話教室に通わせることに決めた。

全く同意できない 同意できない どちらともいえない 同意できる 非常に同意できる

7. 外国の文化に触れる機会を得るため、子どもを英会話教室に通わせることに決めた。

全く同意できない 同意できない どちらともいえない 同意できる 非常に同意できる

8. 小学校の英語活動が現在（5年）より低い学年から始めると良いと思う。

全く同意できない 同意できない どちらともいえない 同意できる 非常に同意できる

9. 小学校の英語活動がより早く始めれば、小学生は英会話教室に通わなくても良いと思う。

全く同意できない 同意できない どちらともいえない 同意できる 非常に同意できる

子どもが英会話教室に通い出した年齢（ ） 子どもの性別（ ）